



Meal Planning: Your Ticket to Better Nutrition and a Healthy Weight

Good nutrition does not just happen—you have to plan for it. Consider this frequent scenario. You are tired from a long day and everyone is hungry NOW! You open up the freezer and pull out a box of frozen corn dogs and fries to heat up for the family. You wash it down with a liter of soda pop. The result? A high calorie, low nutrition meal. In this age of fast food and busy schedules, planning healthy meals often falls by the wayside and a “whatever, whenever” philosophy begins to apply. This can contribute to weight gain and sabotage attempts to lose weight. It can also make for a diet that is anything but nutritious.

How can you eat healthy, well balanced meals and still have time for your family? With a small investment in time, you can be on your way to a more organized and healthful approach to eating. To plan nutritious meals, begin with the goal of having breakfast, lunch, and dinner each day.

Second, make a list of healthy foods for each meal that you and your family enjoy and will eat. Brainstorm with your family and come up with a list of 4-5 simple, quick entrees that everyone enjoys. Review recipe cards, cookbooks, food magazines, or internet websites for ideas. Add a fruit, vegetable, bread/grain and a beverage (such as milk) with the entrée to balance the meal. The other days can be for leftovers, quick meals such as soups or sandwiches, or days when you choose to or need to rely on restaurant food. Older children may really enjoy being involved in the meal planning process and preparation.

Use the food guide pyramid as your guide to include more fruits, vegetables and whole grain breads/cereals and less fat. For example, breakfast may consist of having some bagels,

fiber rich cereal, juice and skim milk on hand. Similarly, lunch might include lean deli meats and cheeses, whole grain bread for sandwiches and portable fruits and vegetables. Add low fat chips and pretzels for variety. Ideas for quick lunch and dinner meals include bean soup, 300 calorie frozen dinners, frozen fajitas, salad mixes, pasta and spaghetti sauce, frozen bean burritos, prebaked pizza crust (add veggies, sauce and low fat cheese) and vegetarian burgers.

The next step is to build a grocery list using your menu for the week. Follow these steps:

1. Arrange a list by categories (and if possible, matching your grocery store aisles): produce, dry goods, canned goods, dairy, meat, frozen, bread, etc .
2. Review your menu and put each item or ingredient in the correct category on your list. If you decide to save your menu cycle for future use, check off items you have on hand after listing all ingredients (use a pencil so you can erase!).
3. If you use coupons, attach your coupons and annotate which items you have a coupon for.

Voila! Your menu planning is done! What's more, your menu planning is reusable. Just add additional ideas to your list as you think of them or the family requests them.

Meal planning does take time, but it is time well spent. No longer will you walk into the house, fling open the cupboards and try to cobble together a meal. Keep a list of what meals you can make and mark off meals as you make them. When you get home, consult your list, grab the ingredients and get cooking. Relish the control you will have over your food—rather than the other way around!

Want more ideas for how to eat healthy and maintain a healthy weight? Contact your local base Health and Wellness Center (HAWC) or Dietitian.